

Rock-cut images in Dirgheswari Dewalaya, North Guwahati, Assam

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Abstract

Dirgheswari Dewalaya, located atop Sitachal Hill in North Guwahati, Assam, stands as a vital Shakti Peetha and a prominent center for Shakta worship, deeply intertwined with the region's historical, archaeological, and mythological fabric. This study investigates the religious, cultural, and iconographic significance of the site, with a special focus on its extensive collection of rock-cut sculptures, engravings, and associated oral traditions. Through field-based qualitative methodologies, including exploration, non-participant observation, and unstructured interviews with temple custodians, the study documents various deities represented in rock- such as Ganesha, Hanuman, Yamraj, Shiva, and a possible form of Goddess Durga, as well as symbolic carvings like footprints, animals, and abstract motifs. The study also explores the temple's vibrant ritual calendar, particularly highlighting Madon Chaturdashi and Durga Puja, and their role in sustaining communal identity and spiritual continuity. Additionally, it raises concerns about conservation, noting how devotional practices-particularly the application of oils, vermilion, and incense-combined with natural weathering, threaten the preservation of these invaluable sculptural remains. The study presents Dirgheswari Dewalaya as a living cultural monument where archaeology, mythology, and ritual converge, demanding urgent attention for heritage conservation alongside continued religious practice.

I. INTRODUCTION

North Guwahati, located in the Kamrup district of Assam- a major state in the North Eastern region of India- is a site of immense historical, religious, and archaeological significance. Positioned along the northern bank of the Brahmaputra River, directly opposite the city of Guwahati, this region has long served as a vital cultural and spiritual center. Its

landscape is dotted with ancient temples, inscriptions, and architectural remnants that testify to its prominent role in the religious and political history of Assam.

The area is home to several notable religious and archaeological landmarks. Among the most prominent are places such as Doula Govinda Temple, Dirgheswari Dewalaya, Aswakranta Dewalaya, Manikarneswar

Dewalaya and *Rudreswar Dewalaya*. These sacred structures not only serve as centers of active worship but also as repositories of art, architecture, and ritual practices associated with Hinduism, particularly the *Vaishnavite* and *Shakti* traditions. Supplementing these temples are historically significant artefacts such as the *Kanai Boroshi Bowa* rock inscriptions, which are invaluable for understanding the political and military history of medieval Assam. Place names like *Rangmahal* (a royal recreational palace) and *Rajaduar* (king's gate) also hint at the region's role as a seat of ancient administrative authority, possibly during the rule of early dynasties and the later Ahom kingdom.

Among these important sites, *Dirgheswari Dewalaya* stands out for its historical, mythological, and religious importance. Located atop the Sitachal Hill, this temple is dedicated to Goddess Kali, and has been a prominent center for *Shakti* worship in Assam for centuries. The temple is sometimes referred to by alternative names such as *Bagheswari* or *Gupto Kamakhya*, which connect it symbolically to the broader network of *Shakti Peethas* across the Indian subcontinent (Sarma, 1990; Barua, 1966; Neog, 1980; Sarma, 1990; Bhattacharjee, 2003; Dutta, 2008; Sharma, 2010; Nath, 2013). The name *Bagheswari*, for instance, derives from *bagh* (tiger), the traditional *vahana* (vehicle) of Goddess Durga, reinforcing the temple's association with the fierce feminine divine.

Historical records, particularly a rock inscription found within the temple premises, attribute the construction of the present-day temple to Ahom King Siva Singha, who ruled from 1714 to 1744 A.D. The inscription clearly states that the temple was constructed in Saka 1659, which corresponds to 1737 A.D. (Bhuyan, 1930; Choudhury, 1959; Sharma, 1978). This period marked a time of extensive temple-building activity under the Ahom dynasty, which sought to legitimize their rule and integrate local cults within a broader framework of state-sponsored Hinduism.

In addition to its historical significance, *Dirgheswari Dewalaya* holds profound mythological importance. According to local

belief and folk traditions, a part of Goddess Sati's body is said to have fallen on Sitachal Hill, thereby sanctifying the site as one of the revered *Shakti Peethas* (Barbaruah, 1981). This sacred geography has made the temple a major pilgrimage destination, especially during festivals like *Durga Puja* and *Modon Chaturdashi*, which celebrate the divine feminine in elaborate rituals and community processions.

Furthermore, the *Dirgheswari dewalaya* is also associated with ancient sages and their ascetic practices. It is believed that Markandeya Rishi, one of the revered seers in Hindu tradition, once visited the site and performed austerities in honor of Goddess Durga. These legends, transmitted through oral traditions and temple lore, add layers of sanctity and historical depth to the site (Bhattacharjee, 2003; Nath, 2013).

This study investigates the religious, cultural, and iconographic significance of the site, with a special focus on its rock-cut sculptures, engravings, and associated oral traditions.

II. METHODOLOGY

The study employed a qualitative research approach, with primary data collected through field visits using the Exploration Method. These visits enabled the direct observation and meticulous documentation of engravings, sculptures, and other material remains present at the identified sites.

To examine the religious edifices and their cultural context, the Non-Participant Observation Method was applied. This involved observing the religious activities, structures, and environments without direct participation, ensuring an objective understanding of the site dynamics. Unstructured Interviews were also conducted with priests and custodians of the religious sites to gather in-depth insights into the historical, spiritual, and ritual significance of the locations.

For accurate geospatial documentation, a GPS-enabled camera was utilized to record the coordinates of significant features, assisting

in the spatial mapping of the archaeological and cultural landscape.

Moreover, the study was supported by extensive secondary research, drawing from scholarly books, research articles, academic journals, and Ph.D. theses. These sources provided essential historical context and interpretive frameworks, enriching the analysis of the primary data collected during the fieldwork

III. FINDINGS

The *Dirgheshwari Dewalaya* is a rich archaeological site with rock-cut sculptures of various Hindu deities, intricate rock engravings, house structures, and assemblages. The rock-cut sculptures include deities such as Ganesha, Yamraj (the Hindu god of death), Hanuman, and several unidentified figures. These artifacts highlight the site's historical and cultural significance, showcasing a blend of artistic and religious heritage.

Ganesh:

During fieldwork in the present study five rock-cut sculptures of different size of Ganesha were observed.

Ganesh No. 1:

This image of Ganesha is situated on the right hand side of the entrance of the *Dirgheshwari dewalaya*, with coordinates at latitude 26.194222° and longitude 91.718758°. The sculpture is carved in a shrine-like canvas measuring 60 cm x 40 cm and depicts a *chaturbhuja* (four-armed) Ganesha. He is adorned with a regal crown and is seated in the *sayalalitasana* posture, where one leg is bent and resting on the ground while the other is slightly lifted, on a lotus. It also depicted wearing an upavita, a sacred thread, and his *vahana* (vehicle), a small mouse, is positioned below the lotus. Unfortunately, the image has sustained damage over time, particularly to the hands and facial features, with other portions of the body also affected. Consequently, the implements held by the deity's hands are no longer clearly discernible.

Ganesh No. 2:

The second Ganesha image on the Dirgheshwari hillock is situated adjacent to the first Ganesha image (Lat:26.242912° and Long: 91.745902°). This sculpture measures 75 cm in height and 80 cm in width. The deity is depicted seated in *ardhaparyankamudra*, a posture where one leg is bent and resting on the ground while the other is bent upwards.

This *chaturbhuja* (four-armed) Ganesha holds a parashu (axe) in his upper left hand and a *laddu* (sweet) in his lower left hand. The implements in the other hands are not identifiable, and the lower right hand is broken. Both feet are clearly sculpted, adding to the image's detailed representation. This Ganesha is adorned with a *kiratamukuta* (a crown) and an upavita (sacred thread) made of a serpent, highlighting his divine and majestic nature. Despite the damage, the image remains a significant representation of the deity.

Ganesh No. 3:

The third Ganesha image (Lat: 26.243297° and Long: 91.7497°) is a large rock-cut sculpture with dimensions of 179 cm in height and 135 cm in width. The deity is depicted seated in the *maharajalilasana* posture, exuding a regal and relaxed demeanor. He is holding a *padma* (lotus) in his upper right hand, a *parashu* (axe) in his upper left hand, a rosary in his right lower hand, and a *laddu* (sweet) in his lower left hand, with his trunk placed on the sweet. The sculpture is also adorned with an upavita (sacred thread) across his body, emphasizing his divine and sacred status.

Ganesh No. 4:

The fourth rock-cut Ganesha at *Dirgheshwari dewalaya* is located near the largest Ganesha on the western side of the hill (Lat: 26.243397° and Long: 91.749678°). This sculpture measures 60 cm in height and 40 cm in width, making it the smallest among all the Ganesha images on the Dirgheshwari hill.

This *chaturbhuja* (four-armed) Ganesha is depicted seated in the *maharajalilasana* posture, reflecting a majestic and relaxed pose. However, due to exposure to the elements, the image has suffered significant damage. As a result, the *ayudhas* (weapons) held by the deity are not clearly discernible. Despite the damage,

the image remains an important part of the site's religious and cultural heritage.

Ganesh No. 5:

The fifth Ganesha image at the Dirgheshwari site is located at the top of the hill near the main temple (Lat: 26.243497° and Long: 91.74942°). This sculpture measures 75 cm in height and 80 cm in width. Ganesha is depicted seated on a lotus in the *maharajalilasana* posture, conveying a sense of regal ease.

This *chaturbhuja* (four-armed) Ganesha holds a lotus in his upper right hand and a *parasu* (axe) in his upper left hand. His lower left hand holds a *laddu* (sweet), upon which he rests his trunk. The lower right hand of the image is broken. A notable feature of this sculpture is the large and *ornate kirtimukha* (monster face) crown adorning Ganesha.

Sculpture of Hanuman:

Situated on the left-hand side from the entrance (Lat: 26.243528° and Long: 91.749592°) a Hanuman sculpture is positioned at a slightly elevated level from the large Ganesha image (Ganesh no-5). This depiction portrays Hanuman as a man with the face of a monkey and a distinctive long tail, characteristic of the beloved Hindu deity.

Due to the application of thick layers of oil and vermilion on his body, the details of Hanuman's weapons are somewhat obscured. However, it is discernible that he holds a mace in his right hand. He is also depicted lifting the hill, symbolizing the legendary act of carrying the mountain to retrieve the life-saving Sanjeevani herb.

Yamraj:

Adjacent to the prominent sculpture of Ganesha No. 5 is a striking relief believed to depict Yama, the Hindu god of death and justice. The deity is shown seated on his traditional mount, a buffalo, distinguishable by its prominent upward-curving horns and sturdy frame. The buffalo is depicted in a dynamic pose, with its legs positioned as though in motion, suggesting vitality and movement.

Yama holds a weapon- likely a mace in his left hand, a traditional attribute symbolizing authority and strength. His right hand, though

partially eroded, appears to rest on his chest. Notably, Yama's head is turned backward, giving the impression that he is looking over his shoulder, possibly invoking a narrative or symbolic gesture within the composition.

The buffalo is adorned with a bell around its neck, and its long tail is sculpted to nearly touch the ground, enhancing the realism of the figure. The entire sculpture has been subjected to considerable weathering over time, leading to the erosion of finer facial features and intricate details.

Engraving of Shiva:

Approaching through the entrance, on the left-hand side, an engraving of a deity's face with a third eye on the forehead can be observed on a large rock. The presence of the third eye identifies the image as that of Lord Shiva, a prominent deity in Hinduism.

Unidentified deities:

Among the numerous archaeological elements found within the *Dirgheshwari Dewalaya* complex, a particularly intriguing feature is a pair of unidentified deities located on the right-hand side of the stone stairway that leads to the main shrine. The figures are seated back-to-back, each turning their heads to look at one another. Their iconography suggests a male and female form, both adorned with crowns, hinting at a divine or royal identity, though the exact deities remain unidentified.

Nearby, close to the *mandapa*, a pair of foot impressions surrounded by engraved flower petals is prominently displayed. These are locally revered as the footprints of the Mother Goddess Durga, and like many of the sacred images within the complex, they are heavily coated with *sindur* (vermilion), signifying ongoing devotional offerings.

A sculpture depicts a six-armed female figure, likely a goddess, standing in a dynamic posture with her weight shifted onto the right leg and the left leg slightly bent. Although the facial features are largely eroded, several iconographic details remain discernible, including long unbound hair, a tall headgear or crown, large circular earrings, and a prominently modelled upper torso. The lower part of the body is scantily clothed, revealing

detailed anatomical rendering. In her lower right and upper left hands, the goddess holds a long spear or staff, which is directed toward the face of a figure on her right, suggesting an aggressive or combative action. Her middle right hand is raised in the *Abhaya Mudra*, a symbolic gesture of protection and fearlessness. The other two hands hold indistinct objects, possibly ritual weapons or attributes, but have suffered damage, making identification difficult. Flanking the central figure are two smaller figures with folded hands, positioned in a gesture of reverence or submission. One of them may represent a subdued demon, reinforcing the iconography of divine victory.

Based on the multiplicity of arms, the presence of a spear, the dynamic stance, and the *Abhaya* gesture, the figure is tentatively identified as a form of Goddess Durga, possibly depicted in the act of subjugating evil forces a theme commonly found in Shakta iconography.

There is also an image of a sage, who locals believe to be Markandeya Muni. The sage is depicted seated with both legs folded, likely in a meditative or contemplative posture.

Non Human Figures:

A Shiva Linga is also installed within the temple premises, signifying the site's deep-rooted association with one of the Hindu god Siva. In addition to these, several other symbolic and enigmatic carvings are found scattered across the temple grounds: depictions of a candle, a circle (interpreted by locals as the sun and moon), a chessboard pattern, two tusked elephants, four miniature temple-like structures, a series of dot markings on surrounding rocks, and the partially broken sculpture of an animal, resembling a tiger. At the eastern boundary of the complex, there is also a visible brick alignment from the Ahom period marks the site's historical significance and continuity through time.

IV. DISCUSSION

Dirgheswari Dewalaya is one of the most influential Shakti cult centers in Assam. It continues to play a vital role in the religious life of the local population, engaging individuals across castes and communities in a variety of

ritual practices and festivals. The *Madon Chaturdashi*, celebrated annually in April, is one of the temple's most important festivals. It reenacts the divine marriage of Lord Shiva and Goddess Dirgheswari. The Goddess's idol is adorned and carried in a grand procession through the town by four devotees. The journey includes a ritual purification bath at *Aswaklanta Dewalaya* using holy water from the sacred *Bishnupad*, followed by a symbolic wedding ceremony at *Manikarneswar Dewalaya*, where Lord Shiva is believed to be spiritually present as the divine bridegroom. Accompanied by Vedic chants, the sacred marriage is solemnized, after which the image of the Goddess is ceremonially returned to *Dirgheswari Dewalaya*.

Another major celebration at the temple is Durga Puja, marked by elaborate rituals, aesthetic decorations, and community participation. A striking feature of the celebration is the ritual animal sacrifices, especially of buffaloes, conducted on the ninth day of the festivities. Other important festivals include Shivratri, Nag Panchami, and various regional observances, which reinforce the temple's centrality in the spiritual life of North Guwahati.

Interestingly, the temple's cultural resonance extends beyond its immediate religious community. The Garo people of nearby villages such as *Bor Baka* and *Horu Baka*—although many have now converted to Christianity—maintain oral traditions that associate Sitachal Hill, where the temple stands, with their ancestral sacred space for ancestral rituals.

V. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, North Guwahati represents a unique confluence of history, archaeology, mythology, and living religious traditions. The *Dirgheswari Dewalaya*, with its rich iconography, Ahom-era patronage, and mythic associations, stands as a testament to the enduring cultural and spiritual legacy of this landscape. However, these sculptures face dual threats: the inexorable wear of natural weathering and the cumulative impact of ritual offerings. The layering of vermillion, oils, and

the soot from incense and lamps, while deeply rooted in expressions of faith, poses serious conservation challenges.

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